

The rise of executive coaching

Executive coaching has become one of the most popular development tools used to enhance managers' performance, both individually and organisationally; yet there are still a number of inherent problems in its usage. **Angela Mulvie** looks at the development of executive coaching as a specialist method of developing managers, and argues that organisations have still a lot to learn about choosing both coaching methods and suppliers, monitoring the impact of this type of development, and understanding how powerful it can be in developing peoples' capabilities.

Coaching has been described as a “solution-focused, results-oriented systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of performance, self-directed learning and personal growth of other individuals”¹. Such a definition implies a dialogue and ongoing relationship between two people, one seeking help and support to find solutions to problems (“the coachee”), the other facilitating this activity to the satisfaction of both (“the coach”). Coaching has grown in acceptance and usage as a key development activity not just in the business world but also in terms of peoples' personal lives. Originating in sport, coaching has become recognised as one of the most powerful tools available to enhance the individual's self-esteem and performance. In the business world in particular, executive coaching which has grown out of the leadership movement is being used in many organisations as a way of helping and supporting busy managers towards improved performance and productivity. Yet problems exist in the way in which such usage is planned and monitored, and little appears to be done on evaluating the outcomes of such investment.

Some definitions of coaching

The term “coaching” has come to mean many different things. The terminology of coaching is itself confusing. Described as “a rapidly expanding business, second only to the IT industry in its growth rate in the USA”², the origins of coaching lie in the field of sport. In today's business climate, however, its roots can be found in psychology, psychotherapy and counselling. In the United States in the 1980s, Thomas J Leonard, a financial adviser based

in Seattle, is credited with first using the term “coaching” in a non-sporting context. His work with clients developed into a formal structure of knowledge and techniques and in 1992, to allow others to benefit from his work, he established Coach University (CoachU), now one of the largest coach-training organisations in the world.

The sports coach, with whom we are all familiar, is usually a figure who will develop a sports team or develop an athlete towards first class performance. The coach aims to bring out the best in the client and ensure that he or she is performing at peak. Goals and targets will be set and the skills and strategies of teamwork considered. The life coach is an expert primarily in the job of coaching itself, although he or she may also have specialist knowledge in the client's profession. The focus of the work of this type of coach is on helping people to realise long-term goals, both personally and professionally, by a process of self-discovery. The focus, however, is usually on the former with the coachee focusing on improving his or her personal skills, feelings and self-esteem, and performance for personal satisfaction.

On the other hand, the career coach will help the individual review career options and strategies and provide support to make more sensible and appropriate decisions about work and career opportunities, both within and outside the current employing organisation. In the current economic climate, the career coach is often working with the coachee at a time of downsizing and outplacement. The executive coach may also deal with these issues but is more likely to lend support and help to the busy executive who is dealing with a range of business difficulties as well as personal issues. Often that executive is senior in the organisation

and does not have an appropriate person in whom to confide or who can lend support at difficult times.

There are several kinds of professionals who offer services very similar to coaching. A counsellor will raise awareness about blockages to action and help people overcome difficulties in their lives. The counsellor often specialises in a particular area or issue, so there are counsellors who deal specifically in bereavement, relationships, post-traumatic stress and so on. The popular image of a counsellor is someone gentle and caring, prepared to spend as long as it takes to help the client to function effectively again. This is a somewhat different approach from the straight-talking directness of a coach. A coach should help the coachee to understand the truth of a situation and describe what he or she sees, supporting the individual to discover this for him or herself and move towards appropriate solutions. Coaching is therefore aimed at those who are mentally able to deal with problems/issues themselves. For more difficult emotional and psychological issues, a therapist might be used. Therapy helps patients confront and deal with their past in order to cope better in the future. The coach, however, is not looking for the roots of behaviour but at the results. The coach does not focus on explanations or causes, but rather works to help the coachee find solutions to the issues and circumstances faced.

Another type of individual who has a particular role to play in the business context of coaching is the mentor. A mentor is usually someone older and more experienced with specific knowledge and skills to pass on. This individual will generally be an expert in a particular field and will know the job, work, and organisation so well that he or she can become a guide to someone younger and less experienced. In recognising the value of developing mentors, many companies now have specific mentoring programmes in place to teach what they know. Coaching, on the other hand, is about discovering what the coachee knows, and making this the focus of the way forward.

The coaching process

Coaching will usually add most value where the coachee is going through some type of transition. For the executive, this may be a promotion to senior management or the board room, or a requirement to take on new and demanding responsibilities in an area that is new and challenging. To enable the coachee to move towards some resolution of issues, fears and concerns, the coach will generally follow a series of steps and stages to enable the coachee to:

- understand why he or she feels as they do;
- where they wish to be personally and professionally;

- see what needs to be done; and
- how this can be achieved.

The foundation of the coaching partnership is trust and equality. The coach should not talk down to or impose his or her own views on the coachee. Rather, the coach should formulate a structure whereby the coachee can begin to analyse for him or herself what has happened and what needs to be done.

There are four general phases involved in coaching relevant to all of the above mentioned specialty areas. These are:

1. Establishment of the coaching partnership
2. Action planning with the client
3. The coaching cycle
4. Evaluation and follow up

The time taken to move through each phase will depend on a number of factors, not least the complexity of the coaching issue. For the business executive seeking support, complexity may be a key factor in the length of time required for discussion.

The rise of executive coaching

The initial reason for hiring a coach is to make changes. These may not necessarily be external—they may be internal in terms of changes in attitude, in thinking, and in assumptions. Businesses are now hiring executive coaches to help with problems of isolation, long hours culture, stress, business failures, and so on. This facility is often in addition to what the organisation may be doing regarding formal manager development, and can be seen as an “add on” to formal development activities which often come out of performance reviews. In the last 25 years, a particular focus has been placed on the development of both managers and leaders. It is facilitated through the application of practical programmes supplemented by academic courses of study leading, in many cases, to recognised qualifications in the field of management education. Executive coaching will usually help with such things as determining priorities, reviewing leadership style and developing key relationships, rethinking strategy and the future direction of both the organisation and its people, and the role of the coachee. Executive coaching may also deal with personal issues, and result in the coachee making major choices about continued employment, movement into new areas, and so on.

Executive coaching has developed in parallel with an increasing emphasis on HRM as a source of competitive advantage, evidenced by the alignment of HR systems and activities with an organisation’s large strategy implementation effort for managing

the human capital of an organisation more effectively. As an intensive, short-term process that helps executives address behaviour and issues that are impeding their job effectiveness, coaching is fast becoming a panacea for many ills, professional, personal and corporate. Whilst coaching is generally positioned in the field of executive development and/or management learning, it is also being considered as a tool to improve bottom line results. Its usage is growing in the western cultures of the United Kingdom and the United States; at present however it is at a different stage of development in Asia. In Singapore, Hong Kong and China, there is evidence that executive coaching is being used by multinational companies as part of their offering to executives to enhance motivation, career development opportunities and ensure that they in turn, through this development opportunity, add value to the business. Meanwhile, in India, the application of executive coaching as a manager development tool is largely confined to some large MNCs, rather than Indian companies who may employ some expatriate personnel. Cultural differences in the way managers are developed and the ensuing relationships with staff may be some of the reasons for this slower growth.

Establishment of the coaching partnership

To enable this to happen, the organisation will have to have identified a need for the facility and have chosen an appropriate individual to be the coach. Often this will be an external professional rather than an in-house appointee ie a line manager who has had some type of familiarisation training. Increasingly, companies are putting resource into training managers in the coaching process, often as a way of strengthening their staff development capabilities and providing a career development opportunity for this group. Yet to provide such a facility for senior executives, there is an obvious need to make an external appointment. The choice of such an external specialist may be determined by cost factors and reputation. Typically in the UK, an executive coach can earn up to £2,000 (S\$6,085) a day for services yet the client organisation may not be sure that this represents value for money. Measurable changes in approach and feelings of confidence on the part of the executive may be required. What will be as important here however is the quality of the relationship that can be established and the quality of the coaching provision.

Action planning with the client and the coaching cycle

The work of the coach is then to agree with the coachee on the parameters of the discussion, and begin the process. The length of time for which the coach is engaged will depend entirely on

need, the review of progress, and the follow up support that the executive may feel he or she needs in the long term. At present, no statistics are available on differences in practices; these will vary according to the level of investment and capability of the coach. One way in which organisations can help themselves to make good choices about provision is to ensure that only quality assured coaches are used. For example, the International Coaching Federation sets standards which members have to adhere to. Educational qualifications in coaching are now being developed and with the rise in executive coaching, in particular, forums and information exchanges are being set up to share good practice in this area.

Evaluation and follow up

The problems associated with measuring the influence of HR strategies on an organisation's performance are well documented yet the need to provide such data is critical to both organisational planning and decision-making, and future investment in management learning methodologies. New economic paradigms reflected by innovation, a strong focus on customer satisfaction, continuous improvement and short cycle times require a more sophisticated approach to utilising HRM and HRD as strategic systems to enhance performance and growth. For too long there has been recognition that the measurement of investment in people development is problematic, yet little has been done to research effectively the impact of such investment, either collectively or at the individual manager/leader level.

Recent government funded research in the UK conducted on behalf of the Leadership and Management Unit of the Department for Education and Skills, and the Department of Trade and Industry by the Lancaster University Management School suggests that there is no single form of leadership and management capability that will enhance performance in the same way in all situations, nor is there a single way in which development creates such capability. A plethora of forms of development now exists; these can generate many different types of capability, which in turn will impact on organisational and individual performance in many different ways. A key question for an organisation is the correct choice of such methodologies, given that these may have to vary with situation and context. For example, in the private sector within an MNC, the type of large scale development activities undertaken for leaders and managers may vary markedly from those used in a small- to medium-sized enterprise for commercial, resource allocation, and practical reasons. What the employing organisation needs to

achieve are the “right approaches used for the right purposes to achieve the right outcomes as they vary according to circumstance”. In making these choices, the organisation will also need to consider whether individual or collective management and leadership capability is required, or both. Development activities that contribute most clearly to performance enhancement are generally those that are carried out within or near the organisation, rather than within academic institutions.

As a management learning methodology, executive coaching helps business leaders deal with transitions and under-performance of both themselves and their organisations. Yet surprisingly perhaps a great deal of executive coaching is carried out currently with virtually no analysis of its impact or value. Organisations appear to choose suppliers of this type of development methodology with little regard to what will be and indeed is achieved from what is often a substantial investment.

Making a case for improved evaluation of executive coaching


Whilst employers may feel that they should provide education, training and ongoing development as a “right” for their staff in terms of individual opportunity to enhance career progress, such investment in the workforce must show a return on the input. Evaluation should run through each stage of the development process and not just occur at the end of an intervention. It is therefore important that such interventions, of whatever kind and length, should be monitored at each stage and be designed in response to a specific business and organisational need as appropriate. A number of different stakeholders will generally be involved in

Footnotes

¹ A. M. Grant and J. Greene, *Coach Yourself*, Momentum Press, 2001

² P. Zeus and S. Skiffington, *The Coaching at Work Toolkit*, McGraw-Hill, 2002

the evaluation process both internally and externally where the organisation has sought outside help and support. However, evaluation is more than assessing how far a training activity has achieved its objectives. Evaluation is the collection of a wide range of information in order to measure the total worth of investment in a development opportunity.

To measure the value of executive coaching will therefore take time and effort. Objectives will need to be established and outcomes achieved measured. What will be critical, however, is the nature of the relationship between the coach and the coachee. In many ways, this will dictate the benefits that accrue. The credibility of executive coaching as a management learning tool will only be established when justifiable results ensue from an informed investment, and specific outputs are achieved. 



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